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ABSTRACT

Oral history, a method of collecting historical information through preplanned tape recorded interviews with persons having firsthand knowledge of an historical event, is a viable learning activity at the high school level. This methodology was conceived and later institutionalized by Alan Nevins in the 1940s as a way to counter the loss of valuable source materials through such modern devices as the telephone. Oral history relies on the informal case history, an interview technique using probe questions and careful phrasing to direct interviewee responses to the dimension of response demanded by each question and its related hypothesis. Autobiography, biography, and subject are three types of informal case history which lend themselves to a high school course. Of these three, the subject variant, which focuses on a single important aspect or period in the interviewee's life, is most suitable for a high school assignment in terms of scope and person-hours involved. High school teachers interested in learning more about specific interview techniques and activities should consult works by John Neuenschwander. (LP)

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ORAL HISTORY: ITS BACKGROUND, DEFINITION, AND INTERVIEW TYPES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to provide the target group, high school teachers, with an introductory background of what oral history is like. The expectation is that some of the target group will be encouraged to further investigate this emergent learning activity. Although there is an introduction to the probing question as an important part of the interview process itself, the focus is not on pre-interview activities, interview activities, and post-interview activities per se. The emphasis is on: (1) historical background, (2) definition, and (3) types of interviews.

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INTRODUCTION

What is this thing called oral history? Devotees of Cole Porter and Mozart may resent the impertinent paraphrase, but the question has been made didactically pertinent by the growing interest in oral history as a viable research and learning activity. Since its inception in the mind of Allen Nevins during the 1930's, it has been gaining increasing respectability and a stronger and stronger niche in the halls of learning. Yet many high school teachers still do not know what this young research and learning activity is.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although historians have been interviewing individuals about significant historical movements, people, and events since ancient times, it was not until the late Allen Nevins conceived the modern idea of oral history in 1938 when he wrote in the preface to his still useful book, The Gateway to History, that there should be "some organization which made a systematic attempt to obtain, from the lips and papers of living Americans who had led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the past sixty years."[1]

However, it wasn't until the 1940's that Allen Nevins truly modernized the historical interview. By joining together the interview techniques of the social sciences, a tape recorder, and the historians perspective, Professor Nevins established an Oral History Research Office at Columbia

University. The initial purpose of the program was to interview elite or prominent Americans about their role in and observations on American history and life. In this way he hoped to counter the alarming loss of valuable source materials caused by technological wonders such as the telephone.[2]

The development of the telephone as the primary means of information exchange sharply diminished the adequacy of paper documents as complete historical records. Similarly, personal communications, once written in letters, are now transmitted largely by electronic means, and journals and diaries, the intimate, detailed records that in the past served as valuable primary source material, are now scarce.[3]

Certainly, the growing interest in this young subject was documented in the 1960's when a national organization was founded to promote the technique. The presence of archivists, librarians, physicians, social scientists, assorted laypersons, and historians at each of these annual national colloquia beginning in 1966 and continuing into the 1980's also attest to the widespread interest in oral history.[4] The growth of the use of this technique was further documented in a 1974 study entitled, "The Use of Oral History in Teaching: A Report." The study revealed the widespread use of oral history in the high school, undergraduate and graduate classroom, particularly in the social sciences and humanities.[5]

Unfortunately, despite its increasing use and its gaining a stronger and stronger niche in the halls of learning from its inception in the seminal thinking of Allen Nevin over forty years ago, many high school teachers still do not know what this young subject is like. It is to this group that this paper is addressed.

DEFINITION

A useful and practical definition of oral history is needed if the target group of the paper, high school teachers, are to acquire an introductory level of knowledge and understanding of what oral history is like.

Oral history as defined by Vaughn Bornet: " . . . is a spoken reminiscence which has been recorded with the aid of a trained interviewer-historian in accordance with recognized ethical and procedural standards and typewritten under his supervision."[6]

For Gary Shumway, oral history: " . . . is primary source material in the form of tape or transcript (in many cases both), resulting from recorded interviews with persons deemed likely to harbor recollections of interest to scholars."[7]

These definitions tend to be clinical and consequently more satisfying to the purists in the field. But for high school teachers, at large, perhaps the definition offered by Willa Braun will prove to be the most useful and practical: " . . . oral history is a method of collecting historical information . . . the method includes planned-in-advance, tape recorded interviews with someone who has firsthand knowledge of an event or a way of life that's of some historical interest."[8]

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Oral history, by Willa Braun's definition " . . . is a method of collecting historical information." The collection of information, in turn, is related to the selection of a topic and the formulation of hypotheses and a schedule of related social research interview questions. Of the available types of research interviews, some are more appropriate than others for selection by high school teachers and use in their classrooms.

There are three kinds of social science interviews: (1) poll, (2) informal case history, and (3) psychoanalytical.[9]

The poll-type interviewer reads questions exactly as they are written in the pre-planned interview schedule and adheres exactly to all instructions. Little skill is demanded. The second type of interview is commonly known as the informal case history interview. This type of interview allows the interviewer moderate latitude in terms of the pre-planned interview schedule of questions. The interviewer may change the order of the questions if the interviewee unexpectedly offers an answer to a question that appears later on in the schedule. An unexpected response by the interviewee can stimulate the inclusion of an additional unplanned question on the schedule. Thus by using the interview schedule as a guide to be adapted individually to each interviewee, the interviewer is better able to follow up clues to the interviewees mental set or orientation. The third type of social science interview is known as the psychoanalytical. It permits almost unlimited latitude and falls exclusively within the domain of the psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and psychiatric social worker. Because it demands extensive special training and skill it is beyond the scope of oral history.

Of the three types of social science interviews, only one, the informal case history, demanding the development of a moderate level of interviewing skill on the part of the oral historian falls within the domain of oral history. This moderate level of development must include skill with the probing question. The probing question is an interviewer follow-up question to a response by the interviewee to a research question. Perhaps an illustration will suffice to clarify the function of a probing question in an interview.

Interviewer: "Did you support the 1981 teacher strike in your district?" (Research Question)

Interviewee: "Yes, I did!" (Response)

Interviewer: "Why did you support the strike?" (Probing Question)

Interviewee: "Well, it wasn't only the money and fringe benefits -- though that's what the board said we were after -- but we wanted a bigger say in school policy -- more say about things that affect us -- the board was against that -- they still are -- they want to keep us at the level of second-class citizens!" (Clarifying Response)

The informal case history interview, the method used by oral historians to collect information

> ". . . contains probes, that is, follow-up questions designed to elaborate, clarify, qualify, contradict, or otherwise shed light on a response just given. Following an answer to the classic question: 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' an interviewer would add the classic probe, 'Why?' If the respondent describes himself, say, as an engineer, a probe is called for to determine the sense in which the word is being used -- does he design rockets, drive a locomotive or perform duties once designated by the title 'janitor'? Probes have several purposes: to resolve apparent or actual inconsistencies of replies, to direct the respondent to a certain aspect of the response, to explain a misunderstood question, or to encourage amplification of replies. Schrewd use of probes may transform routine questioning which elicits superficial replies into penetrating questioning which evokes deeply felt hidden responses."[10]

Whether poll-type or informal case history, the interview's content and direction are determined by the hypotheses under examination. Probes

and careful phrasings serve the purpose of directing the interviewees response to the dimension of the response demanded by each hypothesis and its related research question.

In terms of oral history, three variant forms or types of the informal case history interview are available for selection by the high school teacher. These are: (1) the autobiographical, (2) biographical, and (3) the topic or subject.[11]

The purpose of the autobiographical variant is to secure from the interviewee his or her complete life history. This approach requires a long series of interviews with the interviewee. An advantage of this variant is that the oral historian gains a greater familiarity and rapport with the interviewee than is possible with the other two variants. The glaring disadvantage is that because this approach requires a long series of interview contacts it, under the constraints of the time factor in either a semester or quarter hour system, is not a practical assignment to give the typical high school student.

The purpose of the second variant, the biographical, is to secure from an interviewee his or her recollections of an important historical person. For example, the selection of a past governor or legislator who had an important impact on the development of education in the state would be an appropriate choice by the oral historian for discussion with a knowledgeable interviewee. Although the rapport that the oral historian can build up in this type of informal case history interview may be less substantial than in the autobiographical variant, the economy of the biographical interview in terms of focus and person-hours makes it more practical as a course assignment to be given to the typical high school student than the autobiographical variant.

The most practical, in terms of focus and person-hours, and the most commonly recommended and used in high schools is the topic or subject variant of the informal case history interview. This often involves only two or three contacts with an interviewee. It is the purpose of this variant to focus on one important aspect of education or period of an interviewee's life. These topics or subjects may range from a retired person's remembrances of the problems of everyday living during the 1930's to the more recent remembrances of the currently employed teacher of last years teacher strike.

Whether the autobiographical, biographical or topic variant of the informal case history interview is selected by the high school teacher for inclusion in his or her classroom, the interview's content and direction are determined by the hypotheses under examination. Probes and careful phrasing serve the purpose of directing the interviewee's response to the dimension of response demanded by each research question and its related hypotheses.

CONCLUSION

Oral history is a methodology, a process, or a procedure which can be used by high school teachers as a way to reveal some interesting truth about the subject matter or content they teach every day. More importantly, perhaps, it can be used as a learning activity to stimulate students to higher levels of performance in the classroom. It is a way to facilitate comprehension of major classroom concepts by the students themselves.

The thrust of this article is on providing high school teachers with an introductory understanding of what oral history is like in terms of historical background, definition, and types of interviews. Although there is an introduction to the probing question as an integral part of the interview process, the total process, in terms of pre-interview activities, interview

activities and post-interview activities was not presented. Consequently, for high school teachers who are interested in pursuing this matter further, it would be advisable to read Neuenschwander's well written introduction to the field, Oral History As A Teaching Approach (1976).

NOTES

1. Allen Nevins, The Gateway to History (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1938), p. iv.
2. John Neuenschwander, Oral History As A Teaching Approach (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1976), p.8.
3. Minnesota Historical Society. Unsigned and undated pamphlet published by the MHS entitled: Oral History Collection.
4. Elizabeth Dixon and James Mink (eds.), Oral History at Arrowhead: The Proceedings of the First National Colloquium on Oral History (Los Angeles: Oral History Association, 1967), pp. 1-95.
5. John Neuenschwander (ed.), "The Use of Oral History in Teaching: A Report on the 1974 Survey," The Oral History Review, 1975, pp. 61-65.
6. Vaugh Bornet, "Oral History Can Be Worthwhile," The American Archivist, 18 (July, 1955), p. 241.
7. Gary Shumway (ed.), Oral History in the United States: A Directory (New York: Oral History Association, 1971), p. 93.
8. Willa Braun, "Looking at Oral History," Social Science Education Consortium Newsletter, (September 5, 1975), p.1.
9. Ralph Thomlinson, Sociological Concepts and Research (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 50-52.
10. Ibid., p. 51.
11. Neuenschwander, Oral History As A Teaching Approach, pp. 16-17.